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## The ‘serial’ works of A. J. Potter

PATRICK ZUK

From the late 1950s onwards, the compositional idiom of A. J. Potter underwent radical change. In a dramatic departure from the style of his earlier work, which was heavily influenced by the music of his teacher Ralph Vaughan Williams, he began to evolve a more astringent modernist harmonic idiom based extensively on bitonality and polytonality, as well as making intermittent use of dodecaphonic techniques.<sup>1</sup> This stylistic upheaval is of considerable interest not only in relation to Potter’s creative development, but also for what it reveals about the changing intellectual climate of Irish musical life at the period. As I hope to show, Potter’s recourse to dodecaphony seems to have been prompted primarily by pragmatic and external reasons in the first instance rather than by inner creative necessity. He was manifestly reluctant to employ dodecaphonic procedures in a thoroughgoing manner, and although he consistently referred to a number of his works from the 1960s as serial, they can scarcely be considered so in any orthodox sense. His two most significant works in this vein, the ballet score *Gamble, No Gamble* (1961) and the *Sinfonia de profundis* (1968) are examined in some detail to demonstrate this contention and to illustrate the kinds of modified serial procedures that he employed.

### IRISH COMPOSERS, CRITICS AND MUSICAL MODERNISM

On the face of it, Potter’s change in style was a surprising development. Previously, he had not only displayed no interest in exploring atonal or dodecaphonic idioms, but he had remained stubbornly sceptical of their artistic validity. In a provocatively entitled radio script of 1954, ‘The Unimportance of Schoenberg’, he questioned the

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<sup>1</sup> For further information about Potter’s career and creative development, the reader is referred to the following: Maurice Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1967); Charles Acton, ‘Interview with A. J. Potter’, *Éire-Ireland*, 5:2 (1969–70), pp 115–40; Axel Klein, *Die Musik Irlands im 20. Jahrhundert* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1996); Ruth Fleischmann (ed.), *Joan Denise Moriarty: founder of Irish national ballet* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998); Charles Acton and Richard Pine (eds), *To talent alone: the Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848–1998* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1998); Gareth Cox and Axel Klein (eds), *Irish Musical Studies*, Vol. VII: *Irish music in the twentieth century* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2003); Mark Cronin, *A. J. Potter (1918–1980): an annotated catalogue of works* (PhD diss., Cork Institute of Technology, Cork, 2005); Patrick Zuk, *A. J. Potter* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, forthcoming).

claims that had been made for the Austrian composer's work. While he was willing to acknowledge Schoenberg's remarkable technical competence and incontestable artistic sincerity, his faith in his integrity did not extend to his epigones and he was scornful of what he saw as the pretentious obscurantism, snobbery and intolerance of serialism's more doctrinaire exponents, especially those in academia.<sup>2</sup> He remained unpersuaded by modernist styles that alienated such a large proportion of a composer's potential audience. From his perspective, this was a matter of considerable moment: the Irish listenership for classical music was small, and composers who adopted *recherché* contemporary idioms risked being consigned to an even more marginal position in indigenous cultural life.

Potter aired his views on these subjects with greater explicitness in another radio talk, 'The Gap', which dates from 1959 or thereabouts – the 'gap' in question being that which he perceived to separate most contemporary composers from their audiences. Once again, he voiced scepticism about avant-garde styles, averring that their practitioners were more concerned with crude sensationalism than producing work of intrinsic artistic merit. More than that, he claimed to discern an unhealthy climate of intellectual intimidation surrounding new music that deterred commentators from condemning much of it as pretentious rubbish for fear of being incurring ridicule:

The unfortunate public gets another belting of cacophony – while the wretched critics ... though every instinct tells them that what they're listening to is drivel ... daren't say so for fear that the *avant-garde* ... will write to their editors complaining that they're obstructing progress.<sup>3</sup>

In the light of these trenchantly expressed views, it might initially seem puzzling that Potter began to make use of dodecaphonic techniques only a year or so after this talk was written. However, this development is more readily understandable if one considers the change of critical climate that took place in Irish musical life around this time. As awareness grew of the work of Boulez, Stockhausen and other figures of the self-styled post-war avant-garde, who proclaimed the necessity of a comprehensive renovation of musical language extensively predicated on a thoroughgoing rejection

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<sup>2</sup> 'The unimportance of Schoenberg', unpublished manuscript, Potter Archive (hereafter PA).

<sup>3</sup> 'The gap', unpublished manuscript, PA.

of the past, the continued viability of more traditional styles came to seem doubtful in the minds of many influential commentators. In consequence, the music composed by them became less likely to receive critical validation. This development was first signalled in an Irish context by a survey of modern Irish composition by Denis Donoghue which appeared in the periodical *Studies* in 1955. Dismissing most of what had been written as *passé* and hopelessly provincial, Donoghue contended that Irish composers were insignificant from an international perspective because they had ‘fallen into the folk music trap’ and were out of touch with contemporary developments.<sup>4</sup> Donoghue’s article can scarcely be considered balanced or objective, but it has considerable historical interest on account of the classic postcolonial anxieties and intellectual insecurities that it articulates, not least the notion that music by Irish composers could only be taken seriously insofar as it was perceived to reflect a cosmopolitan sensibility and imitated fashionable foreign models. Views of this nature came to be shared by other Irish music critics, and as Séamas de Barra has shown, new Irish works increasingly tended to find favour to the extent that their compositional idiom sounded respectably ‘up-to-date’.<sup>5</sup> In these circumstances, it is not surprising that most Irish composers felt constrained to make a show of willingness to move with the times. Up to the mid 1950s, they had generally worked in styles that were tonal, albeit featuring typical extensions of tonal practice that gained currency during the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Thereafter, one discerns a growing stylistic self-consciousness on the part of Potter, Aloys Fleischmann and a number of other figures, which led them to reconsider their compositional idioms. From his correspondence, it would appear that Potter’s *volte-face* appears to have been prompted by the rather condescending attitudes to his work on the part of prominent Dublin musicians, arising from the fact that Potter devoted a significant proportion of his creative energies to the composition of light music. These attitudes caused him considerable irritation. Writing to Frederick May in 1955 *a propos* of his recent orchestral work *Variations on a Popular Tune*, he commented mordantly, ‘[As] I have not copied either the rhythms of Bartók or the scale systems of Messiaen, the piece may be regarded from the point of view of the Dublin

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<sup>4</sup> Denis Donoghue, ‘The future of Irish music’, *Studies*, 44 (1955), pp 109–14.

<sup>5</sup> Séamas de Barra, *Aloys Fleischmann* (Dublin: Field Day Publications, 2006), pp 127–32.

<sup>6</sup> While it is true that Brian Boydell sometimes had recourse to a rather more dissonant harmonic idiom than contemporaries such as Aloys Fleischmann or Frederick May, it nonetheless retained strong tonal references.

intelligentsia as completely without cultural or any other significance.’<sup>7</sup> He was particularly perturbed by the rather dismissive reviews that his music habitually received from Charles Acton, the music critic of the *Irish Times*, who intimated that it was derivative and undistinguished. Acton’s attitude towards Potter modified after the premiere in 1965 of the television opera *Patrick*, which he admitted was the first serious work by the composer to have made a wholly favourable impression on him.<sup>8</sup> This change of heart can almost certainly be attributed to the transformation in Potter’s compositional style which had come about in the intervening period. In a series of important works written between 1959 and 1965, he developed a more conspicuously ‘modern’ idiom; and as the sound-world of his music became increasingly dissonant, Acton began to speak of it in notably more respectful terms.

#### POTTER’S FIRST ‘SERIAL’ WORKS: *GAMBLE, NO GAMBLE*

As part of what was undoubtedly a deliberate strategy to establish his modernist credentials, Potter let it be known that he had begun to employ dodecaphonic procedures and explicitly described a number of his compositions from this period as serial. The earliest of these scores was purportedly the *Variations on a Popular Tune*, which was composed in 1955. Curiously, no allusion is made to any serial features of this score in the programme note written for the premiere or in accounts of the piece that he sent in the same year to various correspondents, some of which are quite detailed.<sup>9</sup> Yet several years later, the composer took to claiming that the work was not only ‘the first [significant] development in variation writing since Diabelli’, but also ‘the first piece to introduce serialism into Ireland’<sup>10</sup>. The latter claim was also made by Charles Acton, who, writing in 1960 in an *Irish Times* feature article on Irish composers, described the work as ‘Ireland’s first home-produced serialism.’<sup>11</sup> That it was nothing of the kind is evident even from a casual perusal of the score: the piece is unambiguously tonal from start to finish and one would be hard pressed to identify anything that bears even the faintest resemblance to a note-row, let alone any form of

<sup>7</sup> Potter to Frederick May, 22 January 1955, PA. Potter’s allusion to Bartók and Messiaen is almost certainly intended as a swipe at Brian Boydell, whose style at this period was manifestly influenced by both composers.

<sup>8</sup> ‘New opera is a landmark in Irish music’, *Irish Times*, 19 March 1965

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Potter to Frederick May, 22 January 1955; and to Fachtna Ó h-Annracháin, 2 January 1955, both in PA.

<sup>10</sup> Potter to Anne Wallace, 24 February 1962, PA

<sup>11</sup> ‘Music makers’, *Irish Times*, 2 February 1960. See Richard Pine, *Music and broadcasting in Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005), p. 244.

dodecaphonic organization. As the popular tune of the title turns out to be ‘The Wild Colonial Boy’, a sentimental ballad of hair-raising banality much beloved of Dublin drunks at the period<sup>12</sup>, the very idea of using it as the basis for a set of variations in a serial idiom is intrinsically ludicrous. It seems clear that in this instance Potter was amusing himself at the critic’s expense, exacting private revenge for Acton’s hostile reviews.

To the best of the author’s knowledge, the work in which Potter first attempted to use serial techniques was in fact his score for the ballet *Gamble, No Gamble* (1961), which was written for the short-lived company National Ballet (later renamed Irish National Ballet). Potter’s recourse to dodecaphony in this context is interesting for a number of reasons. In the first place, he may have been emboldened to experiment by the consideration that the extra-musical dimension of the stage action would make it easier for audiences to assimilate a score couched in an idiom that might seem challenging and unfamiliar. His chosen approach may also have been influenced by the fact that the concept of the ballet was itself self-consciously experimental, attempting a fusion of music and dance with poetry – in this instance, verses by Patrick Kavanagh which were declaimed at various junctures by an actor-narrator.<sup>13</sup> The subject matter of the ballet was probably an additional factor. Its hero, if such he can be called, experiences the conflicts between his own intense sexual desires and the constraints imposed by what he terms ‘timorous morality’. He embarks on a series of chance erotic adventures with a series of women, a succession of desperate emotional gambles in which he stakes his desire for fulfilment and happiness on each of them in turn, but in each case his initial infatuation rapidly turns to disillusionment, leaving him with feelings of humiliation, self-loathing and guilt. A

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<sup>12</sup> Potter informed a French correspondence that the ballad was ‘extremely popular in places of refreshment all over Ireland, becoming more and more so as the evening wears on’: Potter to Esther van Loo, 26 October 1955, PA.

<sup>13</sup> This seems to have been quite an original concept. The Irish critic Norris Davidson suggested that it might have been inspired by Antony Tudor’s *Dark Elegies*, which was danced to Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder*, or ‘Annabel Lee’, a ballet choreographed by George Skibine which was based on Poe’s poem of the same name. This comparison is somewhat misleading, however, since both of these feature sung rather than spoken text. The only precursor that comes to mind is a rather obscure one, a work by the British composer Constant Lambert with the whimsical title *Mr Bear Squash-You-All-Flat* (1924) for speaker and eight players, which was written when Lambert was only seventeen years of age. This incorporates a spoken narration supposedly based on a Russian folk tale and appears to have been conceived as an accompaniment to a ballet. However, as the piece was never published and only received its premiere in 1979, some twenty-eight years after Lambert’s death, it seems highly unlikely that anyone in National Ballet would have been aware of its existence. (Norris Davidson, introductory talk to a broadcast performance of *Gamble, No Gamble*, August 1961, tape in PA).

subject of this nature could hardly have been explored within the stylistic confines of Potter's earlier music and required rather different expressive resources.

However, there is no question that *Gamble, No Gamble* can be described as a dodecaphonic composition in any orthodox sense of the term, despite Potter's designation of it as such.<sup>14</sup> The only serial feature of its musical organization is the derivation of all of its melodic material quite rigorously from a twelve-note theme announced in stentorian unison at the very opening (Example 1).

**Ex. 1 *Gamble, No Gamble*, opening**

**Allegro** ♩ = 100 [bsns, hns, tpts, tbns + archi, pizz.]

The musical score for the opening of *Gamble, No Gamble* is presented in two systems. The first system begins with a piano introduction in the bass clef, marked *pp, molto*, featuring a timpani part. The full orchestra enters in the second measure with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The piano part then continues in the second system, marked *ff* and *sf*. The orchestral parts are indicated by bracketed abbreviations: [bsns, hns, tpts, tbns + archi, pizz.].

The score's harmonic language is not serially derived, although it is noticeably more astringent than in his previous work and exhibits a strong tendency to chromatic saturation. Potter does not exclude tonal references, however, even if these are often obscure and elusive. The harmonies, as organized on a chord-to-chord basis, still retain a vestigial sense of tonal function, being for the most part complex higher chromatic discords such as ninths, elevenths and thirteenth. It was perhaps this type of approach that Potter had in mind when he spoke about the possibility of writing 'serial tunes, or counterpoint which reflects and emphasizes tonality as much as we ever did.'<sup>15</sup> The expressive possibilities which this sound world opened up proved

<sup>14</sup> Potter to William Glock, 10 August 1961, PA.

<sup>15</sup> Potter to Deirdre MacHugh, 18 March 1966, PA.



entirely apt for *Gamble, No Gamble*, lending it a rather nightmarish, expressionistic quality.

The overall structure of *Gamble, No Gamble* is quite straightforward. After an orchestral introduction, the opening stanzas of the Kavanagh poem are declaimed over a restless pizzicato bass ostinato deriving from the twelve-note theme. There follows a sequence of four linked dances: the opening Wheel Dance for the *corps de ballet*, and then solo dances for the Red, Black and White dancers in turn. The wheel dance is cast as a brilliant swirling waltz in six-four time and features ingenious transformations of the opening twelve-note theme, three of which are shown in examples 2 and 3. Example 2 employs its constituent pitches in inversion, Example 3 in retrograde. Potter has notable recourse to colourful multiple doublings of the melodic material at the fourth and fifth below, and the accompanying harmonies extensively feature quartal and quintal formations – features that may owe something to Ravel's employment of such sonorities in *La valse*, which has a similar erotically charged and doom-laden atmosphere.

**Ex. 2a *Gamble, No Gamble*, bars 73ff.**



**Ex. 2b**

[inversion of first nine notes of 'note-row', transposed]



**Ex. 3 *Gamble, No Gamble*, bars 109ff.**

The central character's encounters with each of the three female protagonists are portrayed in dances that are effectively contrasted in tempo, the cast of their musical material and in scoring. The music for the Red Dancer transforms the theme quoted in Example 3 into a sinister slow foxtrot, punctuated by rasping trombone glissandi and strident trumpet riffs. It rises to a searing climax through obsessive repetitions of pulsating twelve-note chords. The dance of the Black Dancer in nine-eight time, opens with a mysterious texture of low-lying harmonies in divided 'cellos and basses, shimmering, dissonant *tremolandi* in the upper strings and wan figurations in the celesta and harp. The melodic material here is based on motifs deriving from a retrograde inversion of the initial twelve-note theme, giving rise to phrases of plangent lyricism on solo woodwinds (Example 4). The dance of the White Dancer is based on a motif derived from the last three notes of the row and is cast as a kind of surreal gavotte. After references to previously-heard material, it becomes increasingly frenetic, leading seamlessly to the impetuous, headlong music of the finale, which consists of further elaborations of the music of the introduction. These dances have an excellent sense of continuity and sweep, forming a taut and well-integrated musical structure. The close motivic relationships between the thematic material create the impression that the score is cast as a series of developing variations, in a manner somewhat reminiscent of the treatment of the twelve-note material in Britten's opera *The Turn of the Screw* or the finale of Walton's Second Symphony, although *Gamble, No Gamble* is very different in idiom to either of these works. Equally impressive is Potter's handling of the orchestra, which is imaginative throughout, his strident, edgy scoring serving to heighten the general sense of acute emotional tension. The work has languished in neglect since its first performance, which is greatly to be regretted as it is undoubtedly one of his finest compositions.

**Ex. 4** *Gamble, No Gamble*, bars 235ff.



*SINFONIA DE PROFUNDIS*

Potter made rather more extensive use of dodecaphonic techniques in the *Sinfonia de profundis* (1968), which is a work of considerable historical significance in an Irish context as it was one of few substantial contributions to the native symphonic literature up to this point. It was rapturously received by the audience on the occasion of its first performance by the RTÉ Symphony Orchestra conducted by Albert Rosen at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin on 23 March 1969, enjoying a success that was perhaps unprecedented for a serious work by a modern Irish composer. The score had a deeply personal significance and Potter made no secret of the fact that it was autobiographical in nature. The title of the symphony, which derives from the opening line of Psalm 129, *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine* [‘Out of the depths I cried unto thee, O Lord’] and perhaps also to Oscar Wilde’s *De Profundis*, was a covert allusion to his experiences of struggling to overcome chronic alcoholism. As in *Gamble, No Gamble*, much of the work’s melodic material is derived from a note-row, but in this instance the row is also employed to some limited extent as a means of harmonic organization. This dodecaphonic material is used to portray spiritual darkness and psychological disorientation, and is contrasted throughout with diatonic material deriving from two hymn tunes, which Potter clearly intends to represent sanity and hope. Throughout the work, these ideas contend for dominance, until at last the disruptive atonal material is resolved in the triumphant and firmly tonal coda of the finale. As Potter told Acton: ‘By the time we get to the end, things are reduced back to basic diatonics [*sic*]. You could describe the whole symphony as a progression from serialism back to diatonics – and the whole process is epitomized in the epilogue itself’.<sup>16</sup> ‘Orthodox’ twelve-tone composers would no doubt have considered Potter’s practice to constitute both a perversion of dodecaphonic technique and a contravention of the radical modernist aesthetic that informed it. (One thinks, for example, of the controversy aroused by Leonard Bernstein’s *Kaddish* Symphony, in which the American composer had similarly used serialism to portray emotional disturbance.<sup>17</sup>) However, it is not difficult to think of other twentieth-century composers who employed serial procedures in a similarly loose manner, such as the prominent Scandinavian symphonists Joonas Kokkonen and Aulis Sallinen. Potter’s approach is consequently not as wayward as it might first appear.

<sup>16</sup> Potter to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969, PA

<sup>17</sup> See Joan Peyser, *Leonard Bernstein* (London: Bantam Books, 1988), pp 296–7.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that for all of his employment of an ostensibly modernist compositional idiom, the musical rhetoric and the entire conception of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* are very much of the nineteenth century. It is clearly indebted to the arch-Romantic genre of confessional works in which artists detail their inner torments or spiritual struggle, such as Byron's *Manfred* or Rousseau's *Confessions*. In its emotional progression from despondency to radiant affirmation, it evinces an equally obvious debt to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, or to Tchaikovsky's Fourth and Fifth Symphonies. It further recalls both of the latter works in its employment of a motto theme. Potter's finale, which culminates in a triumphant statement of a hymn tune known to Anglicans as the Old 124<sup>th</sup>, features the venerable nineteenth-century device of employing a chorale melody to form the climax of an entire work, signalling the transcendence of the preceding conflicts: one thinks of the finale of Mendelssohn's C minor Piano Trio, Tchaikovsky's *Manfred* Symphony and, of course, several of the Bruckner symphonies.

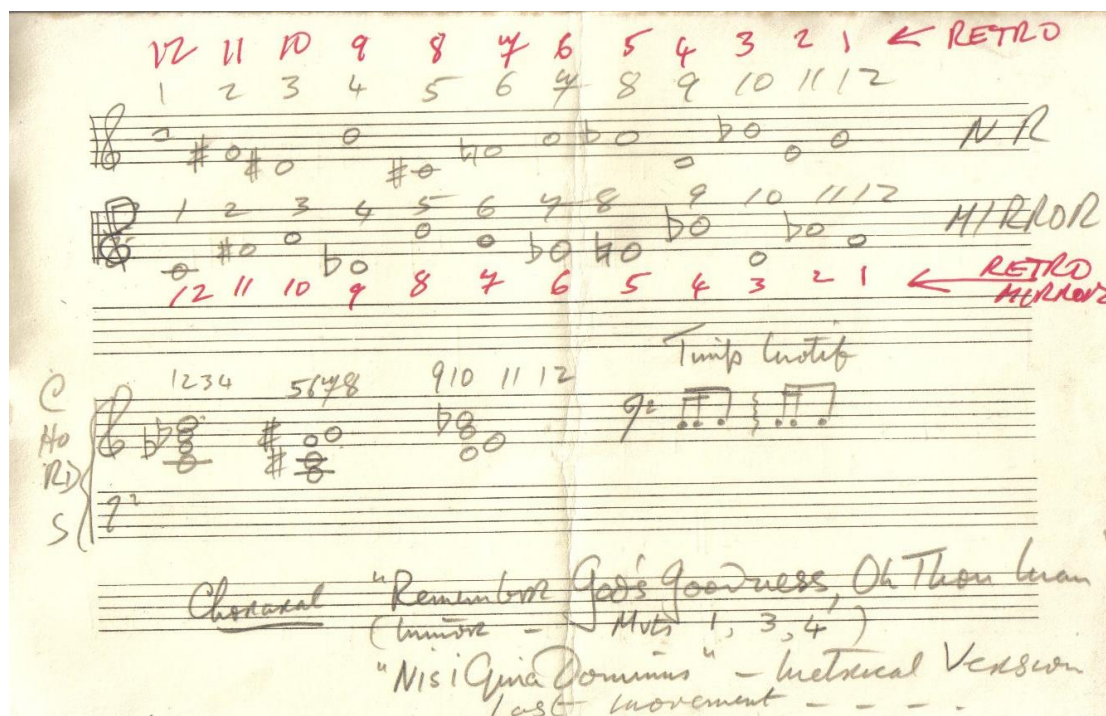
The most obvious model for the *Sinfonia de Profundis*, however, is Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, to which it bears a number of striking similarities. Both works have an autobiographical programme and both are in five movements. Potter's symphony employs an *idée fixe* – in this case, a note-row – which appears in every movement. The second movement of both symphonies is a waltz. The closing bars of Potter's slow movement, during which the *idée fixe* is heard on the oboe, is distinctly reminiscent of the plaintive cor anglais recitative with which the *Scène aux champs* concludes. The idea of depicting an alcohol-induced waking nightmare in the *Scherzo-Phantasma* of the *Sinfonia de Profundis* was undoubtedly inspired by the supposedly opium-induced visions of the *Marche au supplice* and the *Songe d'une nuit de sabbat*. The endings of the two works are very different, however, as Potter's finale is intended to portray a resolution of the preceding conflicts and convey a sense of optimism – although one could still draw a parallel between Berlioz's employment of ecclesiastical chant (in his case, the *Dies Irae*) and Potter's use of a hymn tune, even if to very different expressive effect.

From a technical point of view, the *Sinfonia de Profundis* must be accounted one of the most successful of Potter's large-scale compositions. A detailed examination of the score reveals that it is constructed with considerable subtlety, evincing a notable concern to achieve thematic cohesion and overall unity. The note-row shown in Example 5 pervades all five movements.

**Ex. 5 *Sinfonia de profundis*, basic form of note-row**



**Ex. 6 Potter's sketch of basic material of *Sinfonia de profundis***



It not only generates melodic contours: Potter also derives from it three four-note chords by superimposing its constituent pitches into aggregates. The symphony is also permeated by a terse rhythmic motto, a dactylic figure of two semiquavers followed by a quaver, which tends to irrupt into the texture at moments of high dramatic tension. This can be seen in Example 6, a reproduction of a page of musical manuscript on which the symphony's principal thematic ideas are set down in Potter's hand.<sup>18</sup> The other principal musical ideas are borrowed material – two hymns that would have been readily familiar to Anglican congregations during Potter's youth. Particularly extensive use is made of the first of these, *Remember, O Thou Man*<sup>19</sup> – a seventeenth-century Christmas carol generally attributed to Thomas Ravenscroft

<sup>18</sup> This manuscript is in the possession of Séamas de Barra: Potter jotted down these musical ideas while discussing the *Sinfonia de Profundis* with him in the course of an interview in 1978.

<sup>19</sup> Potter gives the title incorrectly as *Remember God's Goodness, O Thou Man*: these lines open the third verse rather than the first.

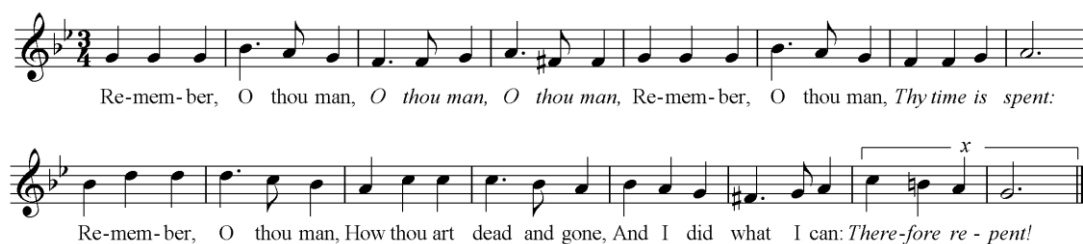
(?1592–1635), which is shown in Example 7.<sup>20</sup> The opening stanzas of the text meditate on man’s sinful nature and his need of divine redemption – a theme that may have had obvious resonances for Potter after his recent experiences, even if one suspects that he would have understood these Christian concepts in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense. The second hymn is a sturdy melody from the 1551 Genevan Psalter known to Anglicans as the ‘Old 124th’ (Example 8). Potter would have known it from his Presbyterian childhood as the metrical psalm *Nisi Dominus* which he described to Acton as ‘our *Te Deum* of deliverance’.<sup>21</sup> Like the text of the Ravenscroft carol, this psalm (126 in the Latin Vulgate or 127 in the King James Bible) emphasizes man’s complete dependence on God. The opening lines run:

Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum in vanum laboraverunt qui aedificant  
eam

Nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem frustra vigilavit, qui custodit.

Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain that build it: except  
the LORD keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain. [King James  
translation]

#### Ex. 7 Remember, O Thou Man (attr. Thomas Ravenscroft)



Re-mem-ber, O thou man, O thou man, O thou man, Re-mem-ber, O thou man, Thy time is spent:

Re-mem-ber, O thou man, How thou art dead and gone, And I did what I can: There-fore re - pent!

<sup>20</sup> It is not known whether the melody of this carol is traditional or of Ravenscroft’s invention: see Hugh Keyte and Andrew Parrott (eds), *The new Oxford book of carols* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp 149–50.

<sup>21</sup> Potter to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969, PA.

**Ex. 8 Old 124th (harmonisation from *Hymns Ancient and Modern*, 1933)**



**Ex. 9 relationship between note-row and motif x**



This melody is only introduced at the triumphant climax of the symphony's last movement, at which point Potter makes explicit a covert motivic connection between both hymn tunes and the note row. In the passage leading up to this climax, a motif deriving from the concluding phrase of *Remember, O Thou Man* which outlines a stepwise descent through a perfect fourth (marked *x* in Example 7) is gradually heard to emerge from a contour outlined by the higher pitches of the row: and this figure, if played in retrograde, yields the opening notes of the *Nisi Dominus* melody (see Example 8). The relationships of these contours to the original note row are shown in Example 9. This symbolic enactment of reversal is of course completely apposite at this juncture, as it constitutes the symphony's emotional turning point. A deeper symbolism is undoubtedly operative here too: the stepwise ascent of a fourth has already been heard in earlier movements arising from the retrograde form of the row. The capacity for hope, as it were, is embedded in the atonal material but is not realized until the finale, through the agency of the hymn-tune. Potter's handling of these motivic interconnections is notably skilful. There is no question but that he was

fully conscious of them, incidentally, as he drew Acton's attention to their existence in a letter written shortly before the work's premiere.<sup>22</sup>

Potter displays comparable resourcefulness in other aspects of the work's construction. Virtually all of the main musical material in the first four movements (and in much of the fifth) is derived either from the note-row or from *Remember, O Thou Man*. In a draft for a programme note, Potter described the symphony as comprising 'an extended set of variations' on the latter, adding,

The variations do not occur all in one movement, but are spread through all five. Nor can they be numbered I, II, III, IV and so on, since at times the working-out is more on the lines of a free fantasia. In fact, to put it another way, the entire work could be described as a free fantasia on the tune. ... The five movements do not fall into the pattern of the classical symphony, but serve to reflect each a different aspect of the psychological foundation of the work. None is formally speaking sufficient unto itself, but each contains its own quota of statement, growth, return and so on. The total growth of the symphony is from the beginning of the first movement to the end of the last.<sup>23</sup>

He was also at pains to emphasize the close integration of the symphony's formal design, and offered a rather different conceptualization of this, likening the work to a vast sonata structure in one movement 'with pauses for breath and coughs at various points':

The first movement ... becomes not only the introduction but the 'first group of subjects' as well. ... The second and third movements (the waltz and the adagio) are in this light the 'second group of subjects'. The fourth, scherzo, is the 'development' and the fifth (epilogue) is the 'recapitulation' cum coda. Roughly speaking, of course.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Potter to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969, PA.

<sup>23</sup> Undated programme note accompanying Potter's letter to J. A. Quigley, 4 February 1969, PA.

<sup>24</sup> Potter to Charles Acton, 16 March 1969.



This description of the work is rather dubious, however, as the material comprising the putative ‘second group of subjects’ is not restated at any point, making the notional ‘recapitulation’ in the fifth movement appear implausible. Nonetheless, the fact remains that the motivic and thematic connections between the five movements are both extensive and intimate.

The symphony’s first movement proceeds at a predominantly moderate tempo and is 169 bars in length, lasting about six minutes in performance. While it does not bear an immediately perceptible resemblance to traditional forms, it could perhaps be construed as a modified sonata form in which the development and recapitulation are conflated. It opens in a dark and menacing mood, with the spasmodic rhythmic figure alluded to earlier introduced on the lower strings. This is initially announced on the pitch A. A few bars later it is restated, this time punctuated by persistent interjections of the pitch E<flat> on the bass clarinet, establishing a tritonal opposition that pervades the rest of the movement. The ‘first subject’ consists of an agitated fragment enunciated on the first violins, which writhes sinuously in semiquavers within the span of a diminished octave. This derives in a very obvious manner from the basic form of the note-row, and is accompanied by *tremolando* chords in the divided second violins and violas which consist of a superimposition of its constituent pitches. The first paragraph consists of insistent reiterations of these ideas: the semiquaver fragment is presented at closer rhythmic intervals, and finally in imitation at a crotchet’s distance – a texture that culminates in an emphatic twelve-note chord. During this passage, the bass line falls by semitones to E and the imitative texture is broken off abruptly by an E major chord with an added minor sixth (C<natural>), presented on the brass and lower winds: against this, the first trumpet enunciates the note-row in darting semiquavers, still at its original pitch. The arrival at E major – the tonality, incidentally, in which the work eventually concludes – suggests that the tritone A – E-flat (alias D sharp) functioned in this context as components of an incomplete dominant seventh, its constituent notes resolving outward by step to G sharp and E respectively. This paragraph leads seamlessly into the next, which introduces the ‘second subject’. Against the persistent sonority of an E major chord with added minor sixth, melodic fragments deriving from *Remember, O Thou Man* insinuate themselves into the texture, played *pianissimo* on the strings in an ethereal treble register. This prepares for a statement on the woodwinds of the first two phrases of the hymn, harmonized in block chords moving in parallel motion. The

presentation of these ideas occupies exactly 70 bars. At this point, a new phase commences which appears to correspond to an orthodox development section. The E<natural> pedal in the bass, which has persisted for over 40 bars, now shifts abruptly to B flat, a tritone away. The logic of this move can be explained as an implied alternative resolution of the A - E flat tritone heard at the opening, this time understood as constituent pitches of an incomplete dominant seventh on F that close inward to B flat and D respectively. This establishes a tense bitonal opposition to the E major that has prevailed heretofore, as the trumpets continue to intone phrases from *Remember, O Thou Man* in that key against the new bass note and note-row semiquaver idea, now sounded up a perfect fourth so that it commences on F, the dominant of B<flat>. The intensity subsides briefly, as the passage breaks off for a sombre unaccompanied 'cello recitative in a low register, which is based on the pitches of the row in its original form. This closes on G, the row's concluding note, which is intermittently reiterated in the bass as a pedal, over which further fragments of *Remember, O Thou Man* are presented antiphonally on winds and divided strings, restated at the same pitch as in the 'exposition'.

The serenity of this passage is abruptly shattered by a *fortississimo* injection of the dactylic rhythmic figure on the pedal G in the timpani, which inaugurates the closing phase of the movement, a span of 60 bars in a faster *Allegro* tempo. It largely consists of a forceful *fortissimo* restatement of *Remember, O Thou Man* in its entirety on the trumpets and trombones in a clearly identifiable B minor, against whirling semiquaver figurations in the strings based on the three four-note chords deriving from the original form of the row. The entire passage, incidentally, is organized over the bass notes C, C<sharp> and D – the lowest pitches of these chords as they were constituted in Potter's initial arrangement of them, at the very opening of the movement. This superimposition of the movement's principal ideas could plausibly be interpreted as a conflated recapitulation of both of them. The stepwise descent of a fourth at the final cadence of the hymn is presented in augmentation against brilliant scalic figurations, with a brief interruption just as the supertonic is about to move to the tonic by the motto rhythm on the timpani, this time on the note F – again at the remove of a tritone. The movement closes with a series of emphatic B major chords, sounded against frenetic reiterations of the semiquaver note-row theme in the strings at its original pitch. Interestingly, in the context of this tonality, it becomes apparent that the basic form of the row is organized in such a way as to suggest a succession of

three chords relating to it – the tonic chord itself, B major with an added C<natural>, the supertonic chromatic chord C<sharp> major with an added minor sixth (a similar chord formation on E was used extensively for the first statement of the *Remember, O Thou Man* material); and, with some enharmonic respelling, an incomplete dominant seventh chord, A<sharp>, C<sharp> and E, with an added D<natural> (see Example 10). (The most obvious precedent for this procedure is, of course, the Berg Violin Concerto.) F<natural> obtrudes for the last time on timpani before the last, long-sustained B major triad.

**Ex. 10 ‘tonal reinterpretation’ of chords derived from note-row**

The example shows two musical staves. The first staff, labeled (i) 'row' chords, original form, contains three chords: a B major triad with an added C natural, a C sharp major triad with an added D natural, and an A sharp major triad with an added C sharp. The second staff, labeled (ii) 'tonal' reinterpretation, shows the same three chords reinterpreted as a B major triad, a C sharp major triad, and an A sharp major triad. Below the second staff, the chords are labeled: 'tonic', 'supertonic chromatic', and 'dominant'. A note below these labels states: ('inessential tones' indicated with smaller note heads).

Rather more extensive use of the row is made in the second movement, which takes the form of a straightforward rondo of the type A–B–A<sup>1</sup>–B<sup>1</sup>–A<sup>2</sup>–Coda. The material of the A section is based on a transformation of the row in its original form, accompanied once again by its chordal derivatives that featured in the first movement. The music exudes a strange atmosphere of listlessness and melancholy, a mood reinforced by the pallid scoring. The B section introduces a contrasting idea that strongly recalls a waltz in *Gamble, No Gamble*. The first strain is presented on the horn (Example 11), and employs the row in inverted form; while the impassioned contrasting strain, which is given to violas and ‘cellos in unison, makes use of it in retrograde inversion. The second A section is practically identical to the first; but when the B section returns, the material is presented in reverse order and rescored, the contrasting strain now being assigned to violins, violas and ‘cellos in unison, and the horn idea to clarinets playing in thirds. In the final repeat of the A, the melody is given to divided first and second violins playing in parallel six-four-two chords - a procedure reminiscent of the simultaneous polytonal doublings employed by Ravel in *Boléro*. This restatement is brusquely interrupted by the motto rhythm pounded out on the timpani. The waltz melody attempts to reassert itself: the tempo quickens and



A reminiscence of the first phrase of *Remember, O Thou Man* follows, which pits the tonality of C sharp minor against sustained chords of B flat in the brass. This pair of ideas is restated three times in varied guises. The second restatement is given to the horn, which plays a melody deriving from the retrograde inversion of the row to a chorale-like string accompaniment. This closes onto a triad of F major, against which the phrase from *Remember, O Thou Man* once again seeks to establish C sharp minor. The third restatement elaborates the opening string theme into an imitative texture, using counterpoint further derived from the row, and cadencing onto a luminous five-four chord on C in the winds and harp. The fourth is once again given to the strings, but is even more intricate, employing the same string melody in counterpoint against itself in inversion and by diminution. The hymn-tune fragment duly follows in E minor, this time concluding on a five-four chord on A. The second part of the movement introduces a wholly new idea, an expansive cantilena played on all the violins in unison, featuring the interval of a fourth prominently (Example 13).

**Ex. 13 *Sinfonia de profundis* III, bars 54ff.**



It is spun out in four very lengthy phrases, the third of which rises to a searing climax on a high G before making a precipitate descent through almost three octaves to a low A flat. It is accompanied by chordal derivatives from the note-row produced by harmonizing each of its notes with remotely related triads (such as occur at the very opening of the movement – see Example 12). The mood of the passage is curiously elusive, but is imbued with a sombre intensity. The final phrase presents the rising figure heard at the opening of the first phrase as a series of fragments, heard against bitonal combinations of B flat triads in the lower brass with shifting triads in the upper woodwind, before closing onto a serene, widely-spaced triad of E flat at the very close.

The *Scherzo-Phantasma* that follows offers a dramatic contrast in every respect, opening with piercing fanfares that swiftly dispel the preceding mood of introspection and establish a manic *Vivace* tempo. Reference has already been made

to this movement's surreal, nightmarish atmosphere: it is pervaded by weirdly distorted snatches of traditional Irish dance music and popular music, which are used to bizarre and unsettling effect. This movement also has a simple bipartite form, which can be summarized as A - A<sup>1</sup> - Coda. The A section is internally tripartite in structure, and introduces two ideas. The first, which sounds like a parody of an Irish jig, is accompanied by grotesquely incongruous harmonies (Example 14); the second is a brash syncopated theme in two-four time first heard on the brass, which has an intentionally vulgar and sleazy character (Example 15).

**Ex. 14 *Sinfonia de profundis* IV, bars 30ff.**

**Ex. 15 *Sinfonia de profundis* IV, bars 47ff.**

As will be readily apparent, both of these themes derive from *Remember, O Thou Man* - the first is based on the hymn's opening phrase, while the second is accompanied by the descending scalar figure occurring at its final cadence. This section lasts 49 bars; at this point, the material of the introduction supervenes, effecting a link to the second A section. This is based on the same material as the first A, but is greatly expanded and altered. Extensive use is made of montage techniques of a kind encountered in other music written around this period - the later works of Michael Tippett afford some notable examples, including the Third and Fourth Symphonies, and the Triple Concerto. Here, over the course of the next fifty or so

bars, Potter creates a highly complex orchestral texture by superimposing four musical ideas in various combinations. The first of these is the jig tune, now presented on strings employing multiple *divisi* and placed in widely separated registers. The tune itself is played simultaneously in the keys of E flat, G, B flat and D flat, while the supporting harmonies feature other polytonal aggregates (the opening of this passage is shown in Example 16).

**Ex. 16** *Sinfonia de profundis* IV, bars 95ff.

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Violoncello

Double Bass

[winds omitted]

This string texture remains a constant background presence throughout the passage, functioning as a kind of ostinato. Against it, the brass and lower woodwinds play a variant of the jazzy tune heard previously, over a bass line that outlines stepwise ascents and descents through a perfect fourth, as before. Next, the note-row makes an appearance, first of all on the trumpet, in a transposition of its inverted form; and then in its original form, played twice by the lower brass in successively longer note values. The last element in the montage is *Remember, O Thou Man*, which is played in its entirety on the woodwinds. Apart from the fact that this procedure enabled him to produce the kind of peculiar atmosphere he had in mind, Potter also seems to have adopted it as a way of circumventing the kinds of developmental processes usually encountered in the nineteenth-century symphonies, to judge from remarks in a

programme note that he drafted not long before the premiere: ‘Bearing in mind that audiences have by now heard a lot of symphonizing, the composer has condensed much of what used to be called ‘development’ and by means of musical ‘montage’ has caused things to be heard instead at one and the same time’.<sup>25</sup> In its context, the passage is conspicuously successful, creating an effect that is quite unique in the modern Irish orchestral literature. As in the waltz, the progress of the music is forcibly arrested by a thunderous statement of the motto rhythm on the timpani; in this case, however, the movement manages to maintain its momentum, and the section merges fluidly into a coda. This consists of two parts. In the first, the brass and woodwind ceaselessly reiterate the motif of a stepwise descent through a perfect fourth against slow-moving syncopated string chords formed by harmonizing a transposed mirror form of the row with remotely related triads (a similar technique, it will be recalled, had been employed in the slow movement). The motto theme erupts once more on the timpani, leading to a final *Più mosso* in which the note-row is declaimed forcefully on *martelé* strings against repetitions of the descending fourth motif on unison winds, before the entire orchestra cadences on an open fifth, C sharp and G sharp.

The last movement of the symphony bears the inscription *Epilogue* – a designation which is perhaps a little misleading, as the *dénouement* of the entire work is yet to come. (Potter’s use of the term, one suspects, was probably prompted by its employment in symphonies by Bax and Vaughan Williams.) This is also a bipartite structure, the second section being somewhat shorter than the first. It opens in a *Moderato* tempo; over a persistent E pedal articulated in the motto rhythm, scurrying fragments of the semiquaver note-row theme from the first movement are heard on the violas. Gradually, the woodwinds pick out the topmost pitches of the row, emphasizing the contour of a stepwise descent through a fourth and establishing the relationship shown in Example 20. The passage rises slowly to a climax, which is cut short by a violent interjection of the motto rhythm on the timpani. A motif from *Remember, O Thou Man* is taken up by the woodwinds; after which the descending scalar figures resume and rise to a second climax, during which reiterated unison Es in the strings contend with B flat major triads in the brass, reviving the tritonal opposition familiar from the first movement. From this point onwards, the scalar

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<sup>25</sup> Undated programme note accompanying Potter’s letter to J. A. Quigley, 4 February 1969, PA.



figures proceed in the opposite direction to outline ascending fourths - marking the onset of a dramatic enantiodromia. These ascending figures are stated with greater confidence and emphasis, rising to a climactic unison B. At this juncture, there is a two-bar *fortissimo* cadenza for timpani and unpitched percussion – the latter making their first appearance in the work. The last section of the movement follows on directly – a jubilant *tutti* statement of the *Nisi Dominus* melody in a radiant E major. Initially, dissonant brass fanfares intervene at the cadence points, but these disappear as the hymn proceeds, and the movement concludes with a series of emphatic E major chords which are presumably intended to convey a sense of exhilaration and spiritual uplift.

Although it is an undeniably strange work, the *Sinfonia de Profundis* is undoubtedly the most satisfactory of Potter's large-scale compositions. The five movements constitute a well-balanced structure, and the symphony as a whole is free of many of the shortcomings that often mar his music. The musical invention is sufficiently vivid to hold the listener's attention from start to finish, and the work gives the impression of being informed by an underlying creative impulse of genuine urgency.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

As will be evident from the foregoing discussion, Potter's description of *Gamble*, *No Gamble* and *Sinfonia de profundis* as serial is quite misleading. The note-rows are employed in a rather primitive manner, being mostly used to generate melodic ideas and, to a limited extent, to determine the harmonic content of the *Sinfonia de profundis*. Potter's procedure consequently has very little to do with classical dodecaphonic technique. This observation notwithstanding, both works have features of considerable subtlety and contain some of his most distinguished music.

It is interesting to note that while Potter made a concerted attempt to sound stylistically up-to-date in the more substantial works that he composed during the 1960s, he did not pursue this aim consistently. He also continued to write music in his earlier manner as well as in a style reminiscent of contemporary British composers of light music such as Eric Coates. Clearly, Potter was trying to satisfy conflicting imperatives. On the one hand, he hoped to achieve critical validation by writing works in a modernist style; on the other, he also wished to reach out to a wider audience for whom works of this nature would have had little appeal. The result was the adoption

of multiple creative personae –a phenomenon which can also be observed in the outputs of other Irish composers of this period, most notably Gerard Victory. The only score in which all the aspects of Potter’s musical personality were accommodated without strain was his posthumously performed opera *The Wedding*, a scathing depiction of small town life in rural Ireland which seems almost postmodern *avant la lettre* in its extensive use of borrowed material, pervasive utilization of parody and exuberant polystylism.

The rapturous reception accorded the *Sinfonia de profundis* by Irish music critics raises important issues about native musical life at the period, particularly with regard to the change in critical climate to which allusion was made earlier. The critics were unanimous in speaking of the symphony as an altogether exceptional achievement and vied with one another to praise it in hyperbolic terms. This level of recognition for a serious composer was truly remarkable in an Irish context, modest though it may seem in comparison with the ways in which creative artists are often honoured in other countries. It is not altogether easy to explain why the *Sinfonia de profundis* scored such a popular and critical success, while other works by Potter and his contemporaries which represent comparable accomplishments did not. As far as the general concertgoer was concerned, the obviously programmatic basis of the work would have made it easier to assimilate, and its appeal was probably heightened further by the overtly theatrical character of the music. These qualities undoubtedly influenced the responses of the critics, all of whom alluded to the underlying programme and the emotive nature of the score in their reviews. One suspects that they flattered themselves for having got to grips with a ‘difficult’ modern score – and one which used serial techniques to boot - and discovering that they could not only make sense of it, but actually liked it. Given Dublin music critics’ preoccupation with not appearing provincial, this experience no doubt provided welcome reassurance of their sophistication. Yet for all their preoccupation with the *dernier cri*, it seems to have occurred to none of them that the unabashedly Romantic sensibility informing the symphony was far removed from that of the latest contemporary developments; and this, together with its comparatively conservative musical language, would probably have caused it to meet with a much less sympathetic reception had it been performed outside Ireland.